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ABSTRACT

There have been few studies comparing personal future perspectives across wide sectors of the life span and none comparing societal future perspectives. Age groups, each consisting of 41 women and 10 men who were elderly (over 60), in middle adulthood (26-45), or adolescence (14-16) were asked to list events they expected to happen in their future lives and in the community, nation or the world; to assign time; and to state if the events would be pleasant or unpleasant. It was hypothesized that a curvilinear relationship would occur between age and length of "looking ahead," with the adult group the highest. While the results tended in that direction, only the elderly were significantly lower than the other two groups. As hypothesized, societal time spans were not significantly different among the age groups. It was also hypothesized that depressive mood would be associated with a shorter time span; this finding was confirmed for the elderly for both personal and societal futures. (Author)

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Future Time Perspectives

In

Old Age, Adulthood and Youth

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University of Oregon

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Paper presented at the American Psychological Association meetings, New York, September 2, 1979

FUTURE TIME PERSPECTIVES IN OLD AGE, ADULTHOOD AND YOUTH*

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Time, whether past, present or future, is an obvious and fundamental aspect of life. People are born into a time ordered world; from birth to death life is a pattern of time sequences through which one passes. The 24 hours of the day forces choices among perceived possibilities. The notion of future time is important, for it functions as a gauge of comparison with the present time/life position in the continuing assessment of purposes and goals. As Fraisse (1963) states, we live in the present, and our present behaviors are based on everything we have learned and experienced in the past as well as our future expectations. Tyler (1978) notes that cognitive structures related to time perspectives serve as determinants of choice among myriad possibilities for action.

The person's ability to master the environment would seem to depend in many ways on the extent to which one acquires a viable future time perspective. Also, whatever orientation an individual has toward future time constitutes a basic aspect of personality, and by assessing future time other significant clues to personality may be revealed.

It was not, however, until fairly recently that research on future time perspective received attention from psychologists. Frank (1939) first introduced the future time perspective construct and was the first to study its relation to human behavior and attitudes. Most of the studies asking people to list or describe future events have used children, adolescents, or young adult samples generally showing longer future time span associated

with positive characteristics. Lessing (1968), found future time associated with personality factors, achievement, and intelligence in children. Others (Siegman, 1961; Craik, 1964; and Stein, Sarbin and Kublick, 1968), working with delinquents, found socialization a factor in future thinking. In addition to achievement, studies done on adult psychiatric patients (Smart, 1968; Schlosberg, 1968; and Braley, 1971) indicate that these patient populations also have shorter future time perspectives. Socio-economic differences hold up across some cultures although these are cultural differences in content (Mehta et al, 1972).

Previous research regarding personal future time of the elderly is only moderate in amount, and we were unable to find any research relating to societal future time spans in old people, although there is some work with high school age subjects (Bachman and Johnston, 1979). Among studies using the elderly, Kastenbaum (1963) concluded that older people are less able to project themselves into future situations but can think well about time in their daily lives. Schien (1968) found older people more near-future oriented and they did not expect many important events to occur. Elderly persons with plans and commitment for the near future seemed to age more successfully (Schonfield, 1973). Chiriboga (1978) found elderly persons to rate old age more positively than younger persons. Tursky (1979) found a general decrease in number and perceived aversiveness of events with age. In general, however, there are very few studies comparing youths, adults and elderly people on personal future time perspectives. Although no direct information appears on previous work with societal time perspectives in the elderly, the present study anticipates relatively less decrement in societal futurity than personal futurity for active non-institutionalized elderly.

How far ahead in their lives do people of different age groups see possibilities as occurring? Is longer future time span associated with pleasantness of events? What is the relation between events foreseen in one's own life and those seen in society's or the worlds future? These and other questions were addressed in this study. One basic hypothesis was that there would be a curvilinearrelation between age and personal future time span; that is, youth and elderly would be relatively less future oriented than those in middle adulthood. In middle adulthood work and family planning activities require more planning and usually provide more resources for the future. This difference should not hold up as strongly for societal events, since all can imagine great time spans.

Study 1 in this project was concerned with length, pleasantness and content of future time perspectives at three age levels. Study 2 dealt with the relationship of time span to depressive mood and was largely based on Krajcir's thesis (1979). A prominent writer on depression, Beck (1967) theorizes that this condition is associated with a shortened future time perspective applied not only to events regarding the self but also the world and general environment. In summary our hypotheses were as follows:

1. There will be a curvilinear relation between age and future time span with the adult group the highest.

2. The societal future time spans will be relatively less influenced by age differences comparied with personal time spans.

3. Depressive mood will be associated with shorter future time span, both personal and societal.

Samples and Procedures

The elderly subjects were non-institutionalized volunteers from community centers, social clubs and classes in Eugene, Oregon. For the whole study, they ranged in age from 56 to 84 with a mean age of 65.6. However, for Study 1, only those 60 years or over were selected. The numbers for the two studies varied since not all instruments were administered to each of the several groups. It was also much more difficult to obtain men than women. In Study 1 there were 10 men and 41 women, all over 60. In Study 2 there were a total of 30 persons, 7 men and 23 women, all over 55. These proportions of men and women were used to select randomly, equal numbers of subjects in the other two samples.

The subjects in the so-called Adult group were volunteers from classes at the University of Oregon. To provide a more middle-aged group for comparisons, only those between 25 and 45 were selected; their mean age was 31.2 years. The adolescent or Youth group consisted of ninth graders with an age range of 14 to 16 and a mean of 14.5 years, all from representative classes in a high school in a small town in Oregon.

The several instruments used in this study were grouped together with some others in what was called the "Life Possibilities Questionnaire." The two major procedures were the separate pages for Future Personal Events and Future Societal Events. Each of these requested the subject to list important events which he or she believed would happen in the future, up to 7 in the case of personal events and 10 in the case of societal events. The time allotted for answering was ten minutes in each case, which was ample time for writing what came to mind. In addition to listing the events the

subjects were asked to estimate the time it would take for them to occur in hours, days, weeks, months, or years; they also checked whether the event would be Pleasant or Unpleasant. Three scores were obtained from the Future Events listings: the time span, which was the median amount of time till the event happened based on at least three responses (subjects not providing three usable times being eliminated), the number of pleasant responses, and whether there were more pleasant than unpleasant responses (i.e., pleasant dominant subjects), and content categories, developed out of earlier work on future time perspectives (Mehta et al., 1972).

Other instruments included the CES-D (Center for Epidemiological Studies--Depression) scale, a 20 item self-report on mood and depressive behavior during the last week (Radloff, 1977). Also we developed two short scales, one called Futurity, which consists of 10 items related to thinking and planning about the future; and Variety, which consists of 7 items reporting on traveling, reading, and viewing activities which would presumably bring much stimulation into the life of elderly people. We hypothesized that the CES-D scores would correlate inversely with length of time span and with the Futurity and Variety scores.

There were no significant problems in administering the questionnaire. It was self-explanatory, but to provide consistency and to cover a few cases of poor eyesight in the elderly, the experimenter read the instructions to the subjects and checked to see if there were questions. In each group of old people a few subjects abstained from participating, several due to reading problems, and a few were eliminated by us , because they did not provide enough scorable responses on the listing of events. Among the few respondents who were rejected, for not having three usable time estimates, there seemed to be no difference between their CES-D scores and those of

the others who were included.

Results

Elderly people took more time to complete the questionnaire, but the productivity of future event responses for the three groups was not significantly different. Out of a maximum of seven responses and a minimum of three responses on Personal Future Events, the number of responses was 5.3, 6.5, and 6.5 for Elderly, Adults, and Youth respectively. For Societal events, the respective means of a maximum of ten were 7.2, 8.8, and 8.8. Since there were no significant sex differences in Study 1, the results of men and women were combined for further analyses.

Study 1 was the comparison of the three age groups, each consisting of 41 women and 10 men, on personal and societal future events. Table 1 gives the results for Future Personal Events. The older subjects were definitely reporting shorter personal time perspectives than the younger groups. The time span score of one and a half years--about one-third of the time perspective of the adult group, which was over four years, and less than one-half of the personal time span of the youngest subjects, which was 3.7 years. On pleasantness of future personal events there were no significant differences; all age groups were predominately optimistic. On the content categories, there were many significant differences. The elderly showed less interest in education, work, courtship, and marriage of self and others, death of others, autonomy, and special occupations. The older group showed more interest in children of others (often their own grandchildren), leisure, travel, and health. Death of self was most frequently mentioned by the elderly, but it only bordered on significance in comparisons with the young group.

Table 2 lists the results with the listing of events foreseen in the future of society (the community, the country, or the world). Here, though youth looks farthest ahead, there is no significant difference among groups. There is however, a significance in the pleasantness of the societal future; both the elderly and the adults see the world around as being more pleasant than the young people. Only one in six youngsters have the pleasant events dominating over the unpleasant events they list, and even the adults and elderly barely see a majority of societal events optimistically. There were incidentally no significant correlations between personal and societal time spans in any of the three groups. In regard to content categories, all groups mention a large number of physical-environmental, political, and economic events. The elderly attend to some events less than the younger groups, namely, physical environment, biological, life style and leisure, miscellaneous, local places, world events, and war and world destruction. The elderly mention human services more frequently than youth.

Discussion

Obviously the interpretation of the results is limited in generality. The elderly subjects were ambulatory, able to read, cooperative and members of community groups. They are the active elderly. The so-called Adult group were all from college classes, though they were predominiately undergraduate returnees to academe, and so not the usual young, innocent Joe College or Betty Co-ed; still they represent an intellectually advanced and academically interested group. The Youth group have much more likelihood of representing the general population; they were from classes chosen to represent a cross-section of nineth graders in the small town in Oregon. All of the groups are limited by Oregon locality. So, of course, as we speak of age differences, these are presented as hypothes for future study that have some backing from

our findings.

One main finding in Study 1 was that the Elderly people listed personal events which extended into the future much less than the younger groups. We hypothesized this result. It is not surprising and in fact it would seem to be realistic and adaptive that old people realizing that their lives are limited, should look ahead only a short way. As one woman put it "I only take one day at a time." Still within the limited projections, as Study 2 pointed out those people who do look ahead farther are likely to be less depressed.

We had hypothesized a curvilinear relation between age and future-thinking, namely that the Adult group would attend to events farther ahead than the other two groups. Though this idea was confirmed in the raw means, the Adults were not significantly longer-ranged in personal thinking, and the fact that they were selected from college classes probably attenuates the finding further; so no support for the curvilinear hypothesis seems to be indicated for the difference between Adults and adolescents. It still seems reasonable to think of adults who have occupational, economic and family responsibilities that clearly extend over quite a few years would have more long-ranged time perspectives. It also seems that young people before assuming responsibilities after adolescence would be more "here and now" oriented; on the other had youth is a period of fantasy about the future and there could be an inverse relation to age from adolescence on. Obviously more work needs to be done to tease out the relations and meaning of short and long range future-thinking at different ages.

We had thought that the elderly would not be as influenced toward close range time perspectives when it comes to societal events. This notion proved true. Althought they did receive the lovest mean societal time span of the three groups, they were not significantly lower than the others. It

was rather surprising to us that there was no correlation between future thinking for the self and for society. The two tasks are evidently sufficiently different to call for quite different approaches.

In regard to pleasantness of events it is very interesting that people in all groups see their own futures optimistically, but are much more pessimistic about society. Several hypothese come to mind: (1) People may fell freer to report negative impressions about their community, country or world. (2) They are likely to feel more in control of their own lives but feel helpless in the grip of larger societal forces, and helplessness seems to be a factor in depression and pessimism (Seligman, 1975). (3) The newspapers and television today are portraying a pessimistic future in regard to energy, pollution and other potential disasters. It was particularly interesting that the young people saw a great likelihood of war and world distruction; one might have thought that older people who had gone through such an experience as war would have made that more prominent than young people. Among the young people, too, there was frequent mention of deaths of prominent people, such as a president or rock singer.

The content differences between the older and younger subjects were numerous. Most of them fit the impressions one has of the "agenda" of life at different stages. The elderly were less concerned about education, work and marriage for themselves. They did see themselves involved with children of others, travel and leisure time activities. In the societal events they mentioned more events related to health and human services, but were somewhat low on mentions about general world events as compared with the other groups.

In regard to the relation of time perspective to depression, Study 2 showed that the elderly do show a relationship. People who look farther ahead, or perhaps feel that there is quite a bit of time ahead for them, are more likely to be optimistic. Although as O'Rand (1969) indicates there

are fewer episodes of status change for the elderly in life ahead (O'Rand, 1969), those who are more optimistic apparently find interesting events a likelihood. The lack of findings with other measures in Study 2 probably reflected the low level of development of the measures of Futurity and Variety; more work needs to be done.

In future work it would be worthwhile to look at implicity life plans of people which include narrowness or width of possibilities for events in the future. Individual life-styles of elderly, adult and adolescent persons may entail living within a certain life plan that includes age. As that age is approached or exceeded, attitudes of the person may change as to what can or cannot be done and what is left to do.

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TABLE 1

Future Personal Events from the Elderly, Adults and Youths

N's: 51 in each group (41 females, 10 males)
Ages: Elderly, over 60; Adults, 26-45; Youths, 14-15

	Elderly	Adults	Youth	Significance*
Mean Time Span (in months)	18.3	52.4	43.9	E<A, Y --
Pleasantness-Unpleasantness				
Percent with P's in majority	86%	92%	98%	N.S.
Content of Events (Percent mentioning)				
Education	18%	76%	74%	E<A, Y --
Work	51	82	80	E<A, Y --
Courtship & Marriage (Self)	22	59	78	E<A<Y
Courtship & Marriage of Others	14	4	2	E>A, Y --
Children (of Self)	43	59	29	---, A>Y
Children of Others	12	2	4	E>A, ---
Leisure	47	18	51	E>A, A<Y
Travel	90	71	20	E>A>Y
Health	45	18	4	E>Y>Y
Death of Self	24	22	12	---
Death of Others	18	55	8	E<A>Y
Acquisition	33	47	41	---
Miscellaneous	35	31	33	---
Autonomy	6	6	24	--E; A<Y
Specific Occupation	0	4	51	--E; A<Y

* Significance at $p<.05$. For time span, ANOVA and, if significant, Tukey test; for Pleasantness, chi square; for content, differences in proportions. In content, significant group differences indicated by > (greater than) and < (less than).

TABLE 2

Future Societal Events
from the Elderly, Adults and Youth
(N's & ages - same as Table 1)

	Elderly	Adult	Youth	Significance
Mean Time Span (in months)	115.1	132.7	176.0	N.S.
Pleasantness-Unpleasantness				
Percent with P events greater than U's	55%	61%	16%	E, A>Y
Content of Events (Percent mentioning)				
Physical Environmental Events	55%	84%	94%	E<A, Y --
Biological	41	88	63	E<A>Y; E<Y
Psychological-Communication-Religious	43	41	29	---
Human Services	43	37	8	E, A>Y
Life Style, Leisure	20	37	39	E<A, Y --
Economic	73	63	59	---
Political	90	84	94	---
Miscellaneous	27	45	8	E<A>Y; E>Y
Secondary-Local	4	4	25	- E, A<Y
Own Country	20	33	10	---, A>Y
Other Country	37	43	24	---, A>Y
World	14	27	6	E<A>Y
War & World Distraction	27	49	80	E<A<Y

Table 3

Correlations between CES-D and Personal and Societal Future Events, for Median Time Span and Number of Unpleasant Responses (N's, 24-30)

	Personal Futures		Societal Futures	
Group	Time Span	Unpleasant Responses	Time Span	Unpleasant Responses
Elderly	-.42*	.24	-.55*	.22
Adult	-.12	.13	-.01	-.16
Youth	.22	.13	-.18	-.10

*Significant at the .05 level.